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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

THE WORK OF MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

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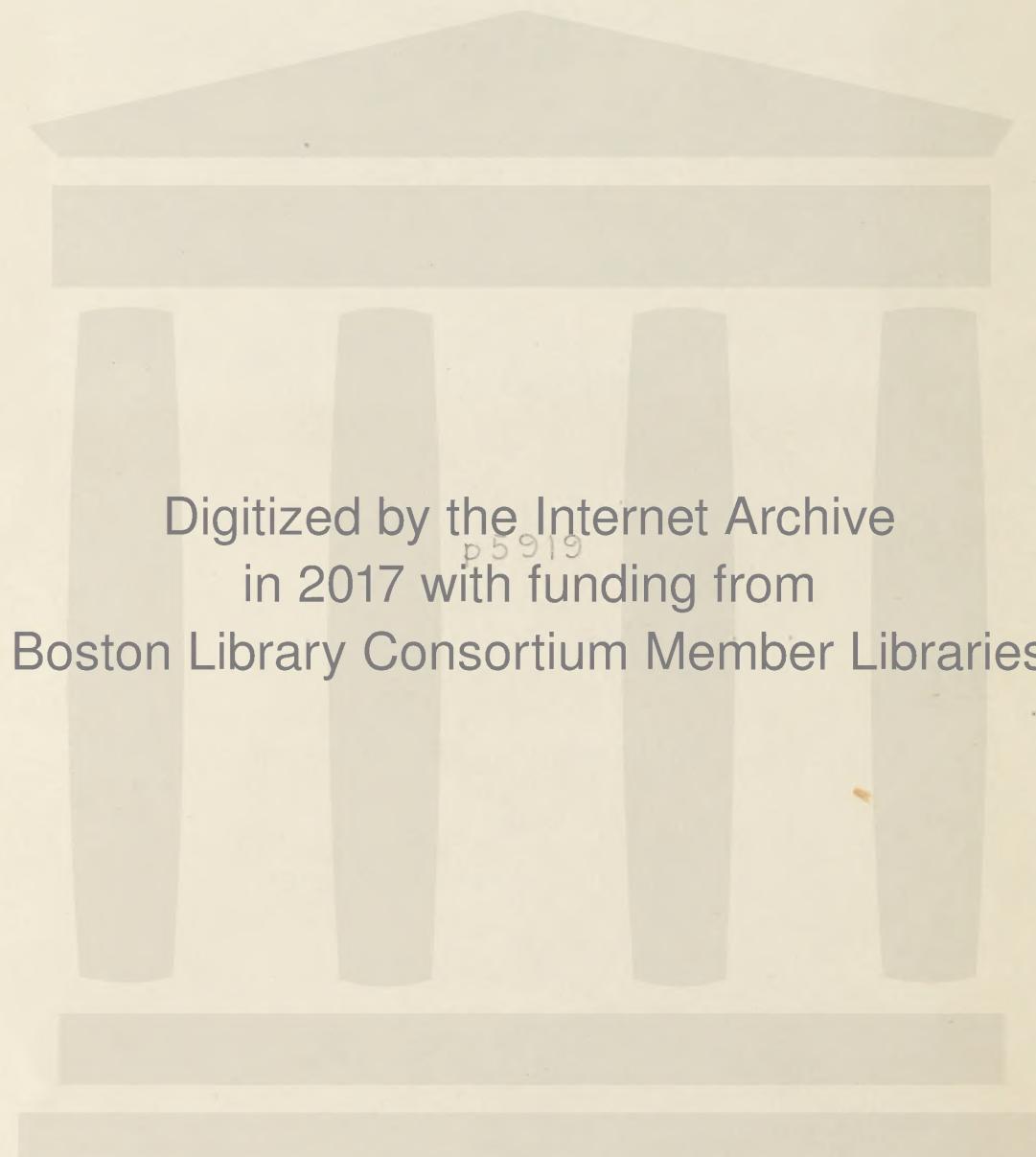
Mary Gertrude Gould

(B. B. A., Boston University, 1923)

In partial fulfilment of requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

S&R.



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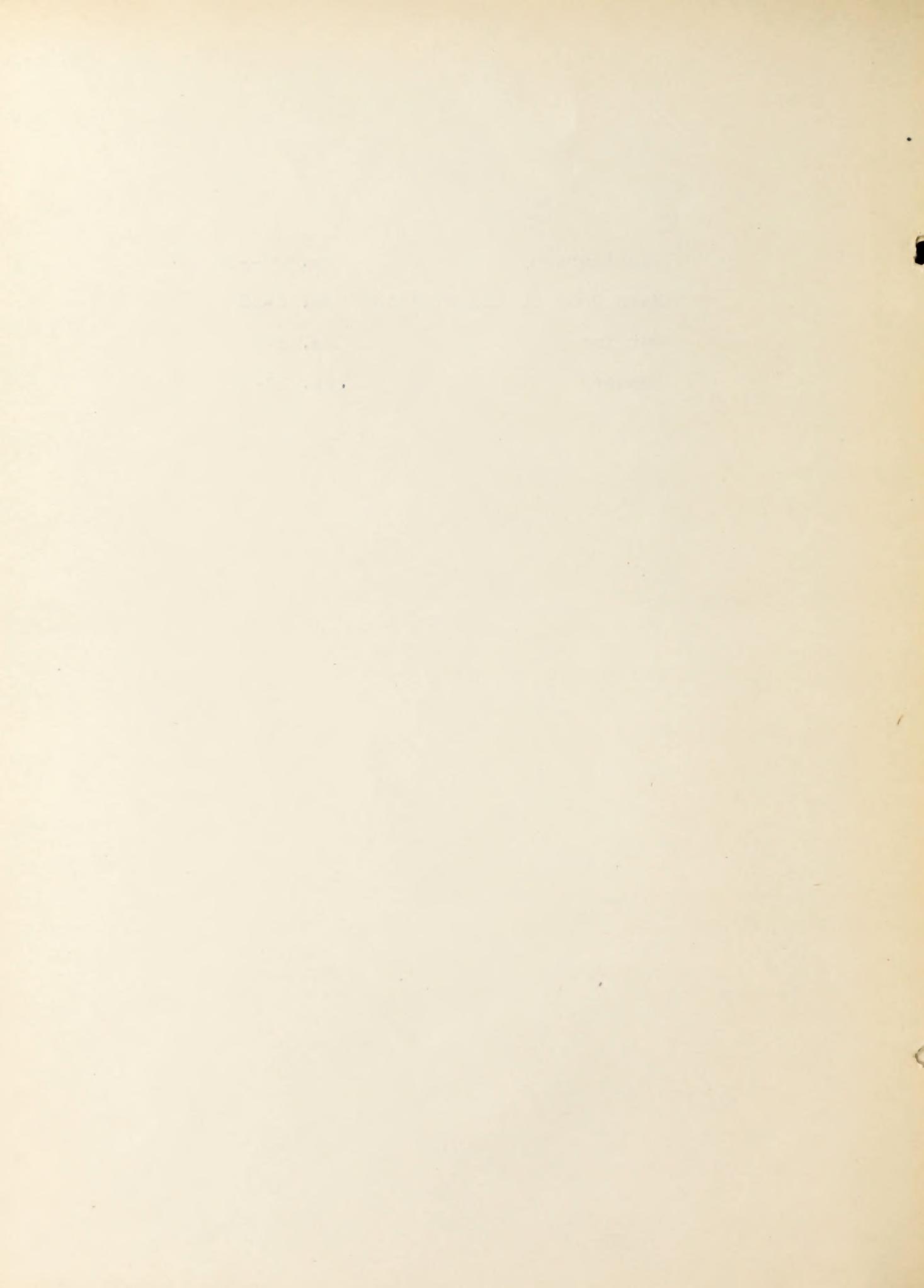
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Mary E. Wilkins, though she has written many novels, has attained the high place in literature that she now holds chiefly because of her short stories. It is the purpose of this study to analyze the characteristics of her style, to depict the human elements and the background with which she deals, to determine the reason for her pre-eminence as a writer, and to present illustrations typical of her work.

Most authors write from their own experience. Especially is this true of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman; therefore a brief account of her life will aid in an interpretation of her work.

Mary Eleanor Wilkins was born in Randolph, Massachusetts, on January 7, 1862. Her mother was a Holbrook of Holbrook. Her father was a descendant of the Bray family that played a prominent part in the witchcraft trials of Salem, Massachusetts. It is interesting to make this link between Miss Freeman and Hawthorne, with whom she has frequently been compared. Mr. Wilkins was the first of his family to leave Salem, when he married and settled down in the Randolph house built by his wife's father. Here Mary was born.

Later, the little family of four,--there was a sister by this time--moved to Brattleboro, Vermont. This is a prosperous village in the beautiful Connecticut valley,

surrounded by mountains; the Green Mountains its background, the hills of New Hampshire in front of it. Here her father, though his trade was that of designer and builder, kept a store, and here the mother and sister died.

Mary Wilkins herself, even from childhood, had never enjoyed good health. This physical handicap always restricted her life; the losses she had sustained saddened her and caused her to withdraw further from society and to devote herself to her father, who had become an invalid. He died after ten years' residence in Brattleboro; Mary Eleanor Wilkins then returned to Randolph, to the simple white house where she was born, two rooms of which were furnished with heirlooms.

From our modern point of view, Miss Wilkins' education was hardly what we should call liberal. She attended the village schools in both Randolph and Brattleboro; for one year, 1874, she was a student at Mount Holyoke Seminary. Much of her education, however, she acquired through her own private reading. She was not versed in foreign languages, so that literatures other than her own were denied her; but she read eagerly from the best English books.

Because she was a girl, her horizon did not extend beyond the household; women were, for the most part, her

sources of information. Her temperament restricted her, too. Though she had a sense of humor at once keen and deep, her feeling for the pathetic was even stronger. As a child she was serious, imaginative. She would brood over questions that puzzled her. She had an extraordinary memory for details, even as a child. Her mind was powerful, interested in the problem of the will--as we might expect from a child whose ancestors had debated predestination and freedom of the will countless times.

A trip to Europe in 1896 to attend the Paris Exposition broadened her horizon, however. A friend of hers, one of the party, informs me that Miss Wilkins had announced before starting that this was a vacation trip, and that, accordingly, she should do no writing. One day, however, she excused herself from the group which was starting out; when her friends returned, she showed them a story she had completed. Though this tale has a French background, it is typically a Wilkins story; a poor peasant, a skilful embroidery worker, attends the exposition--and finds her chief interest and delight in the embroidery of the Orient.

From Grant Overton's book I take this description of her: "Rather a small woman, singularly unaffected, cordial, frank. 'A little frail-looking creature, with a splendid quantity of pale brown hair, and dark blue eyes with a direct look and a clear, frank expression--eyes that readily grow bright with fun!'" Mrs.

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Kate Upson Clark, an old friend, adds to this description. "She possesses the sensitive organization which accompanies a large intellectual development in such a frame. Her transparent skin, her changing eyes, sometimes seeming blue, sometimes hazel, her heavy braids of golden hair, her delicately moulded features, all proclaim a singularly high-strung and nervous temperament."

Miss Wilkins continued to live in the unpretentious white house in Randolph, with her friend, Miss Mary Wales as companion, until her marriage in 1902 to Dr. Charles Freeman of Metuchen, New Jersey. Since then, she calls Metuchen home.

The question arises as to how Miss Wilkins began to write. We have a record that she started in childhood, but that these early scribblings were locked up in her own soul. Like most New England women of moderate means, she desired to make her own living. Not many avenues of work were open to those of her sex; and she was unfitted for teaching. She had felt the urge to become an artist; but, lacking the materials, set about to earn money with which to buy them. Poems and stories for children were her first work; they appeared in juvenile magazines. It should be noted in passing that she did buy paints and did try to use

them; but finding herself unsuccessful in this field, because, I suppose, she lacked the necessary technical training, she kept on with her writing.

Like many another artist, Miss Wilkins shows the influence of her early life upon her work. Her materials are limited, her types of character few, the geography of her stories a very narrow circle. This is exactly what we should expect of one who, because of ill health, of the restrictions of her sex, could not go far afield. She pictured the world as she knew it: the world as compassed by Randolph and Brattleboro. Indeed, it was chiefly of Randolph that she wrote, though Mr. Chamberlain, with whom she collaborated on "The Long Arm" (a two thousand dollar prize story) remarks: "So far as local influences have affected her work, I fancy that those of Southern Vermont have predominated."

An even more direct influence of her environment upon her work is shown by her novel, "Portion of Labour." This book reveals a deep and intimate knowledge of the life of the shoe-worker and the trade of shoe-making, a knowledge acquired by her residence in Randolph, a shoe town.

Charles Miner Thompson, contributing an article upon Miss Wilkins in the Atlantic of May, 1899, explains in a very interesting and ingenious way his theory as to the

development of a village and the epochs in its progress when it furnishes a good background for stories.

There are, so his theories go, three such periods. First of all we have that of the founders--a time hustling, busy. The second phase occurs when the faith and energy of these founders has passed away, and the village remains remote, monotonous. Such a phase practically all of our New England villages passed through; for the younger men of a generation or two ago left for the West, as they now leave the farm for the city. The population, therefore, would be composed largely of elderly men and of women of all ages. The third stage of our typical village is reached when new life appears. The telephone and the telegraph connect it with the outside world. Commercial enterprise is born, societies spring up, their slogan being "Boost our town."

Anyone familiar with Miss Wilkins' work recognizes instantly the second phase as being that with which she dealt. I cannot refrain from quoting from the Bookman of September, 1906, that passage, so frequently quoted, in which Mary Moss so forcefully sets forth this fact:

"In a census of a New England village the proportion of inhabitants would approximate sixty women upwards of seventy years old, five old men, fifteen middle-aged men, seven girls, three eligible bachelors, two children." Mrs. Williams¹

¹
Our Short Story Writers, pp. 160-181

says that one may extend the principle: "two of the three bachelors would live together, forty of the old women singly, and seventeen in various combinations with her own class or the other possible inhabitants; the eight middle-aged men and the seven girls would be shared in various relationships among the fifteen middle-aged women."

It was in 1884 that one of her first stories, at least the first to attract attention, "Story of Two Old Lovers," appeared in Harper's. I have spoken previously as to how she began to write. She has been asked why she chose the short story as her early medium. We have the answer in her own words:

"What directed me to the short story? I think the answer is very simple. The short story did not take so long to write, it was easier, and of course I was not sure of my own ability to write a short story, much less a novel. I consider the art of the novel as a very different affair from that of the short story. The latter can be a simple little melody; the other can be grand opera."

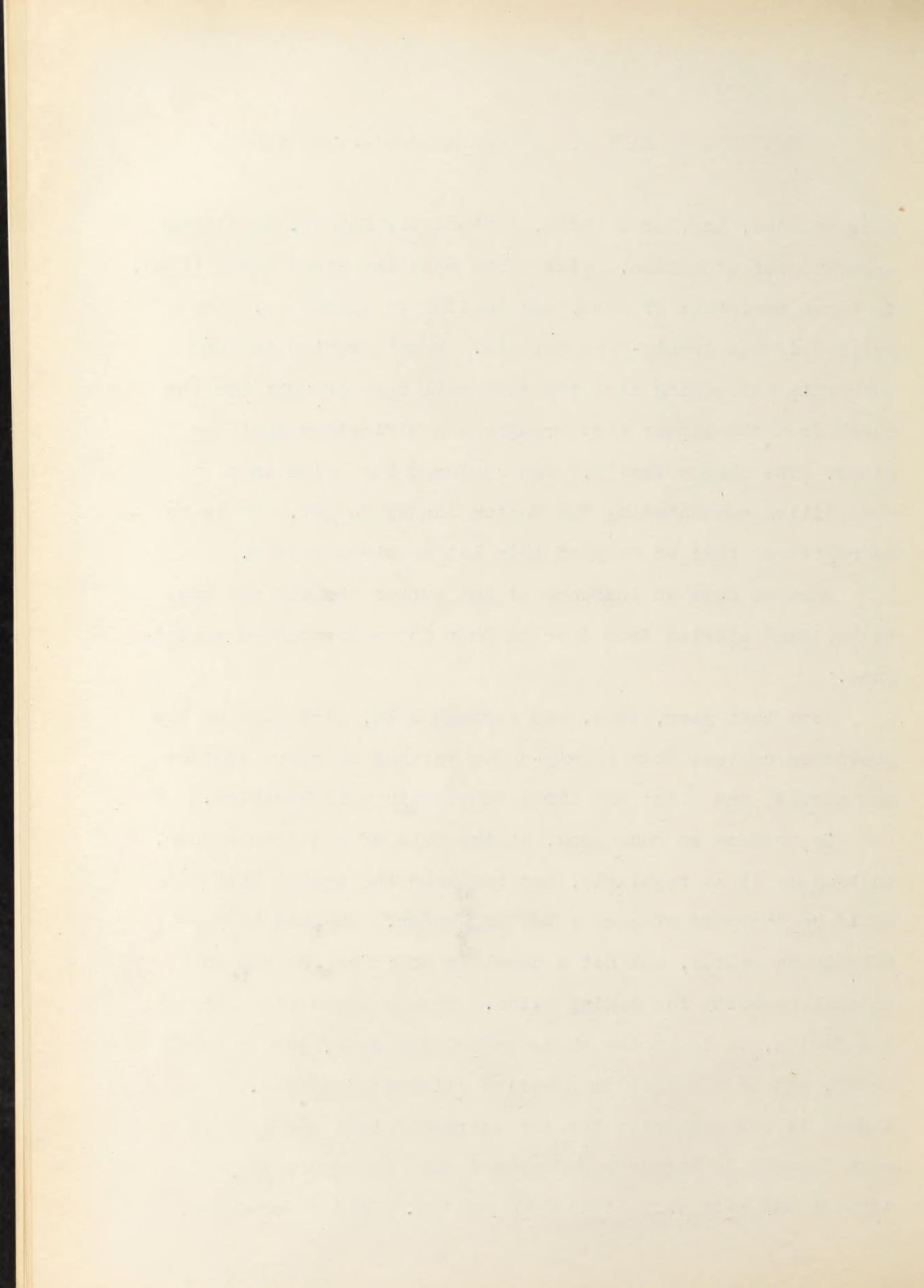
Miss Mary L. Booth was the editor who accepted this first short story. Miss Booth relates that she thought, from the penmanship (this was before the period of the two typewriters upon which Miss Wilkins wrote alternately two separate stories) that the work was that of a child. However, fortunately for

Miss Wilkins, and, as I think, fortunately for us, something arrested her attention. Miss Booth read the story three times, in three varieties of mood, and decided to accept it. The price paid was twenty-five dollars. Grant Overton is our authority for saying that the same mail that brought her the check from the Bazaar also brought a notification that her story, "The Shadow Family," had captured the prize in a competition conducted by the Boston Sunday Budget. It is to be regretted that no copy of this latter story exists.

Here we have an instance of one author who did not have to "peddle" stories from door to door for years before acceptance.

From that year, 1884, and through 1914, Miss Wilkins has published no less than twenty-seven volumes of short stories and novels; one play; and three stories in collaboration.

To produce so much work, at the rate of a volume a year, to produce it so regularly, has required the system that would be expected of such a New Englander. She has been a voluminous writer, but not a careless one; for she has an unusual capacity for taking pains. Though her early work was faulty, it is on the whole remarkably even, due to hard labor, and is a credit to a native literary judgment. Vedder is our authority for the statement that she gave so much thought to her work beforehand that she wrote without copying and with very little correcting. "She planned her



story to the smallest detail before taking up her pen--in later days, before sitting down to her typewriter." Mrs. Williams says that "Mrs. Freeman joins to her first inspirational draft a professional finish. She revises two and three times."

However, even the most ardent admirer of Miss Wilkins must admit faults of style in her early work. One finds upon her pages such hackneyed expressions as "sacred edifice," such incorrect meanings as "smart" in the sense of efficient: Lily Dyer, the third person in the triangle story "The New England Nun" is described as "pretty, bright, and smart." Miss Wilkins uses such provincialisms as the "girl colored up," "She now wore fine chintz or soft boughten wool of a week day." (The Buckley Lady.) Another incorrect meaning is "directly" employed in the sense of "immediately": "Christine went directly for her hood and shawl and put them on." She can write such a sentence as (he) "chose the site of his buildings because they would be easily accessible to the railway." She splits her infinitives. Occasionally she makes an awkward repetition: "Moreover, there was a hard snow-storm, the worst of the season; it would have been barbarous to have turned the girl out of doors on such a morning. Moreover, she developed an unusual and unexpected capacity for usefulness." (The Twelfth Guest.)

Frequently she will write whole paragraphs of sentences 100

uniformly short as to give a jerky, staccato effect. (Was she anticipating the expressionist school?) "The women were sisters. Hannah was Hannah Orton, unmarried, Lucy was Mrs. Tollet. Alfred was her sick husband. Hannah's long, sallow face was deeply wrinkled." (Gentian.)

Yet, granting these defects, the impression of her style is that it is admirably adapted to the life that she portrays. Simple, unadorned, its provincialism fits her subject. It has a strength, a "bouquet" of its own. If there is a lack of grace, this lack merely parallels the characters who live on her pages. She indicates a dialect, but adapts it to the use of literature.

One outstanding characteristic is that of sincerity, which gives her writings an unusual quality. Indeed, one believes that this, a sort of straightforwardness, of inherent honesty, results in that singular compression that has caused Miss Wilkins so frequently to be compared to de Maupassant. She uses not one unnecessary word; she writes clearly, sharply, intensely. Even her titles illustrate admirably this habit of brevity. Just take a few at random: "Sister Liddy," "Christmas Jenny," "A Gala Dress," "An Honest Soul," "Gentian," "Gold," "Silence," "Eglantina." Many more might be added to this list.

Such a style connot fail to make upon the reader an im-

pression of verity, of accuracy. Miss Wilkins is so earnest, so sincere herself, that we believe everything she tells us, at least while we are reading. When we lay the volume aside, we may realize with a start that we know no such New England village as she describes, no such groups of people. But Miss Wilkins is truly convincing.

There is much of repression in these stories; perhaps delicacy, reticence, would be a better word. By nature a Puritan, Miss Wilkins portrays just enough for complete understanding, and then stops. Good taste is the inevitable result.

Although the critic may find faulty sentences, poor construction here and there, especially in the early stories, he can more than balance them by other passages of real beauty. Perhaps that is what Fred Lewis Pattee¹ means when he speaks of the lyric intensity of her work; perhaps, also, this passage taken from "Madelon" may serve as an illustration:

"Richard raised his piercing sweet treble, which seemed to pass beyond hearing into fancy." This same novel contains a description of a ten mile walk, which might well serve as a model of its kind.

All this work possesses, also, a very great vividness. She has written about what was familiar to her, depicted it faithfully, clearly, as she saw it. Herself possessed of a New England conscience, she has described the life around her

¹ Development of American Short Story, page 317

accurately. She can give advice to "The Girl Who Wants to Write," for she practices it herself: "Above all things in the matter of style strive for clarity.....If you lack complete mastery of atlanguage, use short sentences and simple words."

One might think, since these short stories are of New England and special to a high degree, they would be narrow in their application and appeal. Such is not the case; their universality has often been commented upon. They are very definite as to time and place; yet, strangely enough, they have no fixed period. For they are largely studies of character; and character, or human nature, changes little from age to age. Modernize these spinsters of her pages as to dress, the furniture by which they are surrounded, and the food they eat--so frequently mentioned,--their inherent traits would be unchanged, their conduct much the same. It is the portrait that lacks color in the beginning that never fades. Indeed, if we were to compile a volume of her best stories, they would certainly be as interesting one hundred years from now as they are to-day, since they are the records of a social period becoming decadent.

One thinks of Miss Wilkins as being a very serious writer. Yet she is herself possessed of a very keen sense of humor; and humor, quiet, kind, dry, displays itself often upon her pages.

Franklin Crosby, the boy of "The Pink Shawls," does not enjoy the book which his teacher has given him so much as he might, for a school mate is the recipient of two pounds of candy:

"I don't see why kind thoughts and a dollar ain't more than kind thoughts and twenty-nine cents!"

It must be admitted that many of Miss Wilkins' characters lead drab lives, routine existences. It is, certainly one evidence of the author's ability that she can use such material, can see the romance behind and beyond the real exterior, and can make it interesting to us, colorless though it may be.

Yet Miss Wilkins, whenever she permits herself to indulge in description, is very fond of color for its own sake.

Amarina, the heroine of "Amarina's Roses," wears a sprigged pink and white muslin.

"The Secret" was Catherine Gould's, and kept her from marrying John Gleason for many a year. "She was very pretty, fairly a beautiful girl. She was dressed all in red--red hat, red coat, and red gown; there were glints of red in her brown hair.....Her whole face was dimpling with mischief."

However, green is her favorite color. Adeline is the young niece of the story, "The Willow Ware," who rebels against the monotony of her existence and hides that treasured china beneath the floor of the summer house. She plucks up her courage when the rector's young nephew comes to tea; and, woman like, expresses her pleasure in clothes. "Adeline got a pretty new dress from her closet. The gown was cross-barred muslin with a pattern of green leaves. Adeline tied a green ribbon around her waist." She even puts a string of emeralds around her neck.

Luella Miller, the human vampire who gives her name to one story in the volume of the supernatural, "had a green shot silk she used to wear, too, and a hat with green ribbon streamers, and a lace veil blowing across her face and out sideways, and a green ribbon flying from her waist. That was what she came out bride in when she married Erastus Miller."

Miss Wilkins even has the china she mentions adorned with this color. When Lucy Glynn, in "The Discovered Pearl," prepares supper for the lover of her youth, absent twenty years, she "set out her mother's china cups and saucers--white, with a little green vine on the rims."

Practically every criticism of Miss Wilkins' work speaks of the perfect analogy which she employs. "Swift and sure" one critic characterizes it. Though she is a realist, she employs the symbols of the romanticist, and thus reveals the influence of the Puritan in her. "Happy analogy" is the phrase used by another critic. The best illustration that I know of for this use of analogy is found in the crystalline little tale, "New England Nun," from which I have already quoted:

"He seemed to fill up the whole room. A little yellow canary that had been asleep in his green cage at the south window woke up and fluttered wildly, beating his little yellow wings against the wires. He always did so when Joe Daggett came into the room."

In the same way the soul of Louisa Ellis was disturbed by

the entrance of the man to whom she had given her promise to marry. Poor Caesar, the dog condemned to confinement since his puppy days, because he had then committed a slight indiscretion, is equally typical of the state in which Joe Daggett would have found himself had he become Louisa's husband.

One may multiply indefinitely illustrations of Miss Wilkins' figures of speech--swift, direct, quickly comprehensible to the reader. Let me quote a few.

Alfred Tollet, the dominating old man in one of her best stories, frequently included in collections as very typical of her work, "Gentian," is characterized as the "sole autocrat of all her (his wife's) little Russias; her very thoughts had followed him like sheep."

Polly Moss ^{is} the leading character of "Sister Liddy." All the other inmates are huddled around her, that is, all but one. This is a younger woman, whose lover has just come to marry her and take her to a comfortable home. Referring to the latter, Miss Wilkins' aside is: "What was death to her, when she had just stepped on a height of life where one can see beyond it?"

A third metaphor is curiously like the second. Minty and David May are the heroine and hero of one of my favorites of Miss Wilkins' stories, "A Wayfaring Couple." The young husband has lost his job in the Saunders Cotton Mills; the two start on foot for a town one hundred miles away, where he hopes to find work.

They set out gaily. "Now they were fairly on the mountain of their affliction, they found there were flowers on it."

Again, in that both sad and amusing little tale, "A Church Mouse," we come across this statement: "Surprise was too strong an emotion for them to grasp it firmly."

One more figure of speech, too good to be omitted:

"She" (Eliza, a poor half-wit befriended by Luella Norcross, the leading figure in "Life Everlastin'") "comprehended not a word; but that did not matter to Luella, who had fallen into the habit of utilizing her as a sort of spiritual lay figure upon which to drape her own ideas."

The passage already quoted, taken from Miss Moss's article in the Bookman gives a fairly accurate idea of the people about whom Miss Wilkins has written. There are, it must be admitted, comparatively few men in her short stories, and these are usually subordinate to the leading character, playing the part of lover, stubborn, as in the case of Barnabas Thayer and Richard Alger, both in "Pembroke," or, more generally, quietly acquiescent. They wait without protest their wedding day, long deferred because the young woman wishes to pay off a mortgage on the farm, or to earn a silk dress in which to be married. In "One Good Time" William Crane waits twenty years for Narcissa Stone, because her father would not allow her to marry, and then after the older man dies, faces another year of separation when his sweetheart goes to New York to spend her inheritance. Occasionally, the man is the

husband, insisting on having his own way, as Cephas in "Pembroke" or Alfred Tollet in "Gentian"; generally, the women are the dominating characters, just as they far outnumber the men.

Miss Wilkins does not confine herself to adult women. There are children, as the palpitating Emmeline Ames in that story of great understanding of children, "Little Girl Afraid of a Dog." There are older young girls aplenty--sometimes robust, spirited creatures, but more often girls with fair, silken hair, with pale faces and delicate manner, with pointed elbows indicating potential ill health. "Love, slight and flat chested, her shoulder blades showing through the back of her brown dress, stood before Amanda. She held the lamp unsteadily in both her little hands." ("Amanda and Love.")

Of elderly women there are not a few. Sometimes they are poor, oh, so painfully poor! and equally painfully honest. There is Martha Patch, who was making two quilts for two different women. The quilts were finally all made, slowly pieced together by hand. Then the dreadful thought assailed her: she had mixed the pieces! Slowly she ripped up the quilts; determinedly she made them up again. Alas! she found scraps of the materials together as she had first made the quilts; they had been right in the first place. So again she ripped the quilts apart, and for the third time sewed them together again. This is the story of "The Honest Soul."

So poor is she, indeed, that, lacking the money that would

come from payment of her work, she has not been able to buy the food she needs. She is faint from starvation when her neighbor, Mrs. Peters, comes in and revives her with a poached egg, a slice of toast, and the inevitable cup of tea.

Then there are the Babcock sisters, twin heroines of "The Gala Dress." They were poor, too, but above all, they were proud. Pride required that they should not go out except in the black silk that indicated gentility. Unfortunately for them, they possessed only one black silk dress; so that they must take turns appearing in public. When Emily went, the dress was adorned with black lace; when Elizabeth had her turn at an outing, velvet had replaced the lace. One day, when Emily attended the church picnic, she stepped squarely upon a bunch of exploding firecrackers. Thus occurred an awful catastrophe: holes were burned in the skirt; so that it became necessary now to sew a black crepe flounce upon the dress when Elizabeth wore it, in addition to the lace. The two sisters felt dreadfully about the mishap, especially as Matilda Jennings, a neighbor, suspected their subterfuge.

There is, however, the usual happy ending. An aged aunt died, and her daughter sent two black dresses to her cousins. They heaped coals of fire upon Mrs. Jennings by presenting her with the often made over black dress--whereupon the latter contritely confesses: "I want to tell you. I see them fire-crackers a-sizzzing before Emily stepped in 'em."

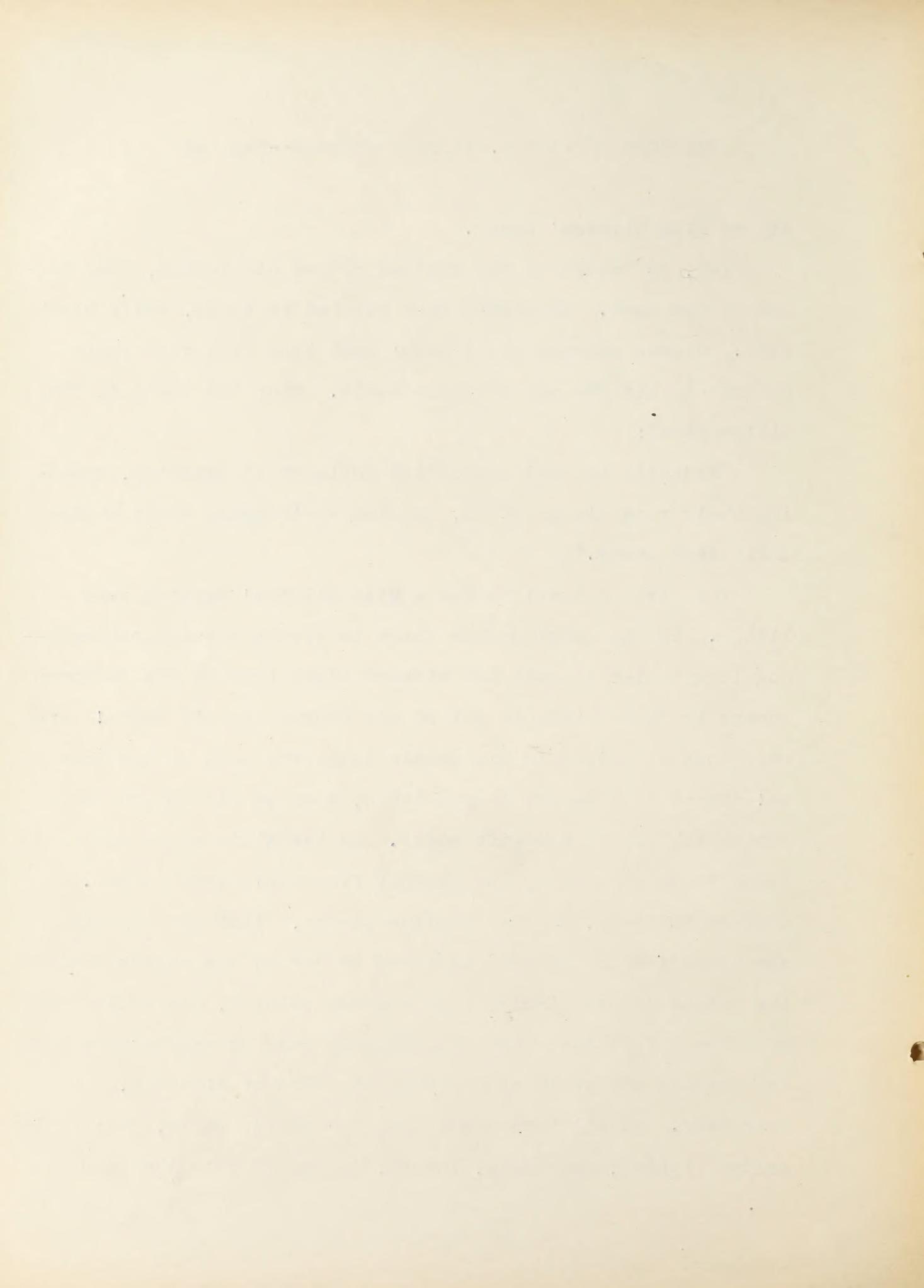
This ending, it seems to me, admirably illustrates the qual-

ity of Miss Wilkins' humor.

Yet, to return to the subject of her old ladies, they are not always poor. Sometimes they rustled in shiny, stiff black silk. Cameos adorned their neck; real lace fell over their bosoms and hid the age of their hands. Thus the aunts in "The Willow Ware":

"Majestic in their unruffled patience of exterior, trailing their rich black skirts, holding their heads erect above their soft laces."

The stage properties for a Miss Wilkins' setting vary little. In the sitting-room there is always a haircloth sofa--how long a time it took for Richard Alger (one of the stubborn lovers in "Pembroke") to get up his courage to sit there! and what hope it raised in his gentle inamorata once he had done so! There is a marble topped table, adorned with plush bound photograph albums and gift books. Louisa Ellis could not allow these to be changed by Joe Daggett from their usual order. Candace Whitcomb, in the "Village Singer," indignant because she found inside the one presented to her by the church choir the notice of her dismissal as soprano soloist, defiantly used hers for a footstool when the minister came to remonstrate with her because she would sing during the solo of Alma Way, her successor. An oil lamp rests upon the parlor table, too; it is seldom lighted, as rarely, indeed, as the fire in the wood



stove. Gentle Paulina, a character of "Christine," had the sticks all laid in her parlor stove against her lover's coming --how long she had to wait for him! Upon the wall, perhaps, hangs a wreath of wax flowers, framed, behind glass. If it is a wealthy household, as in that of "The Fair Lavinia," there may be a little piano inlaid with mother of pearl.

Again, if the scene be laid in the dining-room, it is just as definite, just as inevitable. "She knew just how the tea-table would look decked with its fine damask, its old cut glass, and thin silver, and the set of blue and white willow-ware, which her grandfather Weaver had brought from over seas." This quotation is from "The Willow Ware."

Sometimes these gentle, neat, orderly ladies eat in their tidy kitchens. Thus did the New England Nun, one of the daintiest creatures ever depicted by Miss Wilkins, "a veritable guest unto herself."

Speaking of dining-rooms brings one to the subject of food upon which these book people subsist. Almost always there are baking-powder biscuits, light and feathery; there is a dainty pat of butter; there is cauce, damson prevailing, or possibly honey; there is cake, of course, perhaps fruit cake or pound cake or airy sponge cake. There is tea, always. Mary Moss, in her Bookman article, moans over the predominance of sugar in the diet of these people! Generally, however, they are so thin

as not to have to worry over the calories! If a visitor is expected, cold meat might be added to the menu. I quote again from "The Willow Ware":

"She knew just what they would have for tea. The menu never varied. There would be hot biscuits made with cream, cold ham cut in thick, pink slices, an omelet made with sweet herbs, a mold of quivering red jelly, pound cake, fruit cake, and tea, and dainty little pats of fresh butter."

Like Maupassant, Miss Wilkins sometimes uses the surprise ending. But there is never manipulation on the author's part, never a lack of preparation. As we have said, she plans each story carefully before she begins to write. As a result, we are never brought up with a jerk of surprise because of some unexpected event. "The Wayfaring Couple" furnishes an illustration of this point. Araminta May does a most unusual thing--she puts her sick husband in a surrey and pulls him to a town three miles away, where there is a doctor. Unusual thing though it is, we are not unduly surprised. "The poor fellow got up, threw his arms around his wife's waist, and leaned his head on his wife's shoulder. She was as tall as he." Later on we read: "Minty and David found a few old rusty tools in there, a heap of hay on one of the dusty scaffolds, and the very phantom of an old sulky." And again: "She brushed through the sweet fern, knee deep, with the tall

jar half-poised on her right hip, carrying her strong, beautiful figure like an Eastern woman." Thus we are given the information we need to prepare us for David's strange journey, the fact that his wife was tall and strong, and that there was a surrey in the barn of the abandoned farm.

"Old Lady Magoun" supplies a second excellent illustration of preparation. Mrs. Magoun allows her granddaughter to eat poison berries rather than give her up to her evil father. In this story, Lily notices the berries and speaks of them on her way to the lawyer who, the grandmother hopes, can be persuaded to adopt the child. This appeal failing, the old woman makes no protest when Lily picks and eats the berries as the two return home in the late afternoon.

Miss Wilkins has a deep interest in Nature, as an element that influences the life of her characters. The opening of Hardy's "Under the Greenwood Tree" has frequently been compared with the beginning of "Madelon." I quote first two paragraphs of the latter book:

"This was an old road, but little used of late years, and the forest seemed to be moving upon it with the unnoted swiftness of a procession endless from the beginnings of the world... Everything was very still. The newly fallen snow seemed to muffle silence itself and do away with that wide susceptibility to sound which affects one as forcibly as the crashing of cannon."

Lot talks of the wood:

"Set me down anywhere in the woods when there's a wind and I'll tell what the trees are if it's so dark I can't see a leaf but the way the boughs blow. The maples strike out stiff like dead men's arms and the elms lash like live snakes and the pine trees stir all together like women."

Here is the parallel quotation from Hardy:¹

"To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the firtrees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality."

However, we must make a distinction between the English man of letters and the American authoress. It has been often said of Hardy that his characters are of less interest to him than the natural surroundings, that, for instance, the Egdon Heath of the "Return of the Native," the trees in the "Woodlanders," are the true heroes of his novels. With Miss Wilkins, Nature is subordinate to human nature. With all her power of vivid and delicate description, she sees Nature always in its relation to human passion. It is what the sunset symbolizes to Willian Lynde, the leading character of "The Underling," that interests

¹ "Under the Greenwood Tree" p. 1.

her. "He gazed at the sunset sky. It was a sea of glory; a daffodil radiance, with clouds like wings, of gold and silver and pearl. The man's face, gazing at it, changed. He looked like one for whom a trumpet of action had just sounded."

In what manner does Miss Wilkins deal with her book people? Critics seem generally to agree that she is objective, rather than subjective. Julia R. Tutweiler, writing in Gunton's Magazine for November, 1903, has a most interesting study in which she compares Miss Jewett and Miss Wilkins. Her opinion is that the younger woman is purely objective. "Her detachment reminds one of Bastien Lepage; she has no personal feeling, but immense personal insight. She leaves character and situation to utter their own speech."

She suggests without explaining. Not one word, not one incident, is retained, that is not part of the very fabric of the story.

Though not all of Miss Wilkins' characters seem to us lovable, she appears to love them. Some critics say that she has known the originals of her best stories. Others deny this. But--one can have no doubt that she knows her types thoroughly and intimately. Mrs. Freeman has, indeed, stated that she does not lift characters from life. "All in my books who are real, are dead," she once stated. But she also admitted that her making the characters do the things that individuals of the type they represent would do in similar

environment is remarkably confirmed. Harkins and Johnston, co-writers of "Little Pilgrimages Among the Women Who Have Written Famous Books" (page 148) elaborate Miss Wilkins' own statement. "She has portrayed the dead. Barnabas, in "Pembroke," was a Randolph character. But, as a rule, she has drawn from her imagination."

Probably the greatest proof of this detached manner, this objectivity so carefully maintained, is that even after one has read everything Mrs. Freeman has ever written, one knows practically nothing of the woman herself. She is the fellow spectator at a play one is seeing, even though that fellow spectator wrote the play. One knows she is interested in the players; that she has a dry humor, a keen perception as to the mind of others, an understanding of the unhappy side of life: in other respects she is a stranger.

Her psychology is wonderfully true. She seems to understand equally well the fears of a little child, as in "The Little Maid at the Door," who "turned about and went back to the house, with the tears rolling over her cheeks, but she did not sob aloud, as she would have done had her mother been near to hear," or the conduct of an elderly man, like the poor drudge, Abel Lee, the "Kitchen Colonel." Abel had set his heart on attending the wedding of his granddaughter, the idol of his old age. However, just as the vows were about to be

spoken, his daughter told him that the milk on the stove was burning, that it must be set back. Obediently, from his faithfulness and force of habit, he left the parlor where the ceremony was being performed. Miss Wilkins can understand why sick Ephraim, the little boy in "Pembroke," desires so ardently to enter into the sports of his mates, even though he knows that greater physical discomfort and the wrath of his mother must follow; and at the same time, penetrate the mind of poor Marg'ret Poole, in "A Stolen Christmas," who took some cheap toys from Mr. White's store in order that her grandchildren might not find empty stockings on that eventful day--only to confess to Mr. White later--and to be surprised by his telling her that the package was wrapped for her, anyway. Whether these people possess bodies crippled with age, minds set by the habits of a life time, or are vigorous physically as well as alert mentally, she seems to plumb their very depths. She is especially powerful in her handling of the emotions; for she realizes that we seldom exhibit our real selves, that fear of becoming ridiculous, as well as habits of repression, generally deter us from showing the true depths of our feelings. "Mrs. Freeman exhibits us as we are and as a result her work has an almost poignantly intimate quality."¹

¹ Harper's Weekly, December 30, 1905.

Indeed, much of her power lies in this truthful depiction of natural emotions. Or, as Miss Tutweiler puts it: With Miss Wilkins "the flesh is the obstacle through which the soul stutters half articulate."

Though Miss Wilkins was not first upon the field, for Miss Jewett had preceded her, she revealed New England unto itself. Her characters are indigenous to the soil; as much a part of this section as its upland pastures, its elm dotted meadows. Out of it she drew more than a dozen volumes of short stories dealing with its very life and atmosphere. She worked it as if it were her own peculiar mine. To be sure, her canvas was limited and restricted to a very small portion of New England life. Certain phrases recur again and again: "She was thirty, and had never had a lover." Yet, within this range, what a varied group she discovered. There is no confusing of one character with another; each is distinct, individual. So is one story different from all the others; there is no repetition of plot. Few characters appear more than once, though Emmeline Ames is the little girl in "The Little Girl Afraid of a Dog" and also the young girl in "Joy of Youth." "Edgewater People," as one might infer from the title, since it deals with the life of one community, does show the same characters again and again, like Margaret Deland's "Tales of Old Chester."

Miss Wilkins is indeed a writer of New England. But she is more than that. She is a thoroughly American author. I should like to quote again from Miss Wilkins' "The Girl Who Wants to Write": "If a writer is American, she should carry her patriotism into her work. Look upon the scene with American eyes, and from an American view-point." Though she occasionally does depict the upper strata of society, as in "The Fair Lavinia," "Amarina's Roses," she never deals with the fashionable element; so many, indeed, of her characters are of the plain people that we may say that, in addition to being truly American, she is also truly democratic. She has been heard to say that she likes people who drop their g's and use the double negative--and those who don't.

In the Harper's Weekly of December 30, 1905, appears an "Appreciation" by an anonymous writer. One sentence is especially appropriate here: "Probably no other writer has so truly and feelingly portrayed the greatness and the pettiness, the real joys and sorrows, of our homekeeping American life."

Nowhere has she given proof of this fact more clearly than in "The Portion of Labor." This novel has suffered because of comparison with Hauptman's "The Weavers," which appeared about the same time. Just as the most distant pastures always appear most green, so the story of European conditions seemed more vivid than that of our fellow-countrymen.

As William Dean Howells pointed out:¹

"Poverty expresses patience and despair or oblivion everywhere, but in our country there is conjecturable also a certain surprise, the bewilderment of people who have been taught to expect better things of life and who have fallen to the ground through the breaking of a promise. Was this, their faces ask, really the meaning of the glad new world? If Miss Wilkins has caught this expression of our poor (we do not say she has) she has divined the difference between them and the poor of the Old World, where misery is of such ancient date that all hope has died out of it, and the disappointment of defeated expectation has been long outgrown.

"Miss Wilkins' work is less impressive than Hauptmann's (*The Weavers*) because it is in a region less strange than his."

However, "The Portion of Labor" is a most interesting book, and for two reasons. In the first place, it marks a departure from her usual type of story, which is one that is merely a clear description of character, showing deep insight. In the second place, it is almost "a novel with a purpose," that of portraying the hardships of the factory worker, and is the only didactic bit of writing that, to my knowledge, Miss Wilkins has done. However, it is not a hopeless picture, thanks to the author's imagination and sympathy. The heroine, Ellen Brewster, is admirably portrayed, wholly lovable. Vedder

¹Harper's 1908, page 327

says, in his "American Writers of To-day," "The author has done no work that so surely marks her as an artist as in giving us this portrait, and into nothing else in her writings has she put so much of her woman's heart."

Courtney, in his book, "The Feminine Note in Fiction," has picked out the faults of this novel when he says that there is a slowness of development, a lack of sense of proportion. This criticism is probably based on the fact that more space is used in Ellen's own story than in that of the worker and the strike.

Perhaps I have said enough already to indicate that Miss Wilkins belongs to the school of realism. She has presented life as she saw it; her habits of mind were entirely foreign to impressionism. She is, indeed, the feminine realist of her day and country, a realist who is also an idealist. For she has combined a deep understanding of the difficulties that beset a humble existence with a warm human sympathy, so that she has glorified life while she presents it realistically. She recognizes that, while most people suffer from small sorrows rather than from large, the small burdens seem, nevertheless, to the person who bears them too hard to be endured. With all this faithful picturization, she has added the womanly qualities. She writes in a kindly way, and this, without asking the reader's sympathy as she portrays, for example, Martha Patch facing starvation.

There are those who find fault with Miss Wilkins because her characters are abnormalities, New England eccentrics,

"gnarled and twisted men and women." To these critics we may say, first, that if it is true, it is the unusual in life that interests us; what we read in the newspaper is news, is interesting, because it is not a typical case or story. But is the criticism true? Miss Wilkins has produced, as I have already stated, approximately two hundred thirty short stories. Few personages in these stories appear more than once; there are no two plots alike. Is it possible that one could write only of eccentricities, and so fill twelve volumes? To get down to specific cases. The heroine of that much praised story, "Humble Romance," was stoop-shouldered, overworked, generally unattractive. "From head to foot she was a little discordant note." True. Beside it, however, we may put the beautiful and resourceful Aramina of "Aramina's Roses," who, knowing her heart, set out to obtain the love she desired,--and succeeded. The heroine of "Gentian" was entirely dominated by her strong willed husband. But Mrs. Penn (The Revolt of Mother) finally rebelled against her husband's rule, and attained the large house about which she had dreamed so many years. If some characters are poor, unattractive, others are beautiful or wealthy, or both. If some have never a will of their own, others finally assert themselves.

It is true, however, that one theme runs through all

Miss Wilkins' stories, and many of her novels; that is, the dominance of will.

Louise is the heroine of a story by that title. She has struggled against great odds to keep her grandfather, who is in his dotage, and her mother, from want. Finally, when the little family face starvation, she decides to walk seven miles in the stifling heat of a midsummer's day, to her wealthy uncle, to whom she will appeal for help. He refuses money; but craftily, thinking she cannot carry them home, he gives her a ham, a sack of flour, of potatoes, of sugar--four bags in all. Louise will not give them up. She carries two bags a short distance, sets them down, then goes back for the other two. In this way she covers the seven miles to her house, actually walking twenty-one miles. Nothing but her will sustains her.

Again, take "The Church Mouse," Hetty Fifield. In the gallery of the little country meeting-house she sets up her humble household gods: her bed, her stove, hidden by a gay patchwork quilt. Neither Caleb Gale, one of the deacons, nor his more bustling and assured wife, can prevail against her arguments and entreaties. Finally, even, a small room, devoted previously to the minister's special use, is given over to her.

For another illustration, there is "Lydia Hersey of East Bridgewater." Lydia is one of the most beautiful of Miss

Wilkins' heroines. Her bans to Freeloove Keith have been published; but before the marriage day, they quarrel. It is merely a clash of wills: Freeloove serenades a newly married couple after Lydia tells him it is a vulgar thing to do.

Abel Perkins is another admirer of Lydia. He is literally her slave; will do everything she bids him, so that she heartily despises him.

Finally, only one day remains of the time in which Keith and Lydia may be married before the bans are null and void. Suddenly he appears, commands her to mount behind him, and go with him to the preacher's. She demurs at first, but knows in her heart that she prefers the masterful type of man.

"A Solitary" will serve for the last illustration. He is Nicholas Gunn; heart-broken because his wife left him, he tortures himself by doing exactly opposite to what he prefers. He will not heat his house. He sleeps on the floor. He eats cold corn meal mush. He has the will of an anchorite until Stephen Forster appears and begs that he may rest inside his cottage, for the weather is bitter cold.

Forster is worse off than Gunn. He has worked for his board at the house of his half-sister, Mrs. Morrison. One of his tasks is to do the errands, which tax his waning strength sorely. There comes a time when he can no longer perform even this duty, and Mrs. Morrison decides to send him to the poor-house. However, Forster overhears her plans and runs away by night, but can get no farther than Nicholas's dwelling.

Nicholas takes him in, builds a fire, feeds and warms him. His renunciation of comforts and the society of his fellows clashes with his better nature. Finally, however, the latter predominates; Stephen Forster is assured that he will never go to the poorhouse.

"Pembroke" is considered by most critics to be Miss Wilkins' best novel. It is, certainly, the one most in line with the type of short story for which she is best known. It is, indeed, made up of three short stories: the story of Charlotte Barnard and her lover, Barnabas Thayer; the story of Charlotte's aunt, Sylvia Crane, and Richard Alger; the story of Rebecca Thayer and of William Berry. There is no lack of love between Charlotte and Barnabas, or between the others. But in each case, they are kept apart. Barnabas, calling upon Charlotte, falls out with her father over politics; he is shown the door by the older man; he vows never to return. Though sought by a village coquette, he remains true to Charlotte; the latter may have as a husband the most eligible bachelor in Pembroke; but their love for each other is unswerving.

Richard has courted Sylvia for many a long year. One Sunday, as he goes to call, he finds the stone in front of the door--a sign that she is out. As a matter of fact, she has been delayed by the quarrel at her niece's house; Richard

takes umbrage, and never goes near her again.

Rebecca is forbidden by her mother to marry William, and as Deborah dominates her household, even as Cephas Barnard does his, she will not give in to William's entreaties, until her mother orders her out of the house--as she had ordered Barnabas out when he broke his engagement to Charlotte.

This novel, like most of Miss Wilkins' stories, ends happily. Richard Alger cannot endure the sight of his former sweetheart's going to the poorhouse; he relents, and marries her. Barnabas becomes very sick; Charlotte goes to care for him; this compromises her, so that Barnabas has to overcome his will, calls on her, and proposes again. Rebecca sees happiness again through the eyes of her second child, the first having been born dead.

"Life Everlastin'" has been characterized by one critic as the most powerful short story that Mary E. Wilkins has written. To me it is one of the most powerful in any language. I cannot find a flaw in it. The leading characters are perfectly drawn; and they are not pindling, delicate, love-sick girls or domineering old men, either. There is enough plot to suit the most exacting reader. It is admirably told, moving quickly to the final conclusion, which is wholly logical and natural.

The title illustrates beautifully Miss Wilkins' frequent use of double meanings in the names she gives her stories--

here, the flowers Luella Norcross picks as a cure for asthma, and the life beyond that she hopes will give another chance for God's poor creatures on earth.

But to return to the story now under discussion. Luella Norcross is the leading character. She is an agnostic; she cannot accept Christ, for the precise reason that he is represented as being unlike any other man. Yet her charity is inexplicable to her fellow villagers, who call themselves Christian. She has taken a feeble minded old woman, who can do nothing but scrub, to care for. Tramps never fail of a welcome, a meal, a night's lodging, even. Pedlars and agents are sure of a sale at her house, whether or not Miss Norcross needs the articles they offer her. She carries broth to Oliver Weed, and makes him a pillow of everlasting for his asthma, even though he is a wealthy man with the vice of miserliness.

On one of her trips to Oliver Weed's, she discovered that both he and his wife had been murdered. Her mind jumped at once to the conclusion that the murderer was John Gleason, former tramp, and occasional drunkard--another one of her own protege's.

Luella notified the sheriff of the deed. Search for Gleason was begun at once, but was carried too far afield; for nobody suspected what Luella knew, that he was hiding in the vacant house she owned, adjoining the one she occupied. Stealthily she placed baskets of food upon the door-step. Then her

mental struggle began. Mr. and Mrs. Weed had been foully murdered. Their tortured bodies called out for vengeance. Moreover, other people should be protected. On the other side, there was Gleason's faith in her.

She decided to give him a chance. That night she left all the doors open, except the one to old Eliza's room, which she securely locked. On the kitchen table she arranged the silver spoons, beside them the cream jug. On her bureau she lay several hundred dollars in bills, a gold ring, her ear-rings, and her father's silver watch.

However, morning found her unharmed, her property safe. She was now resolved of her duty; she went to the sheriff's and told him where he would find the criminal.

The following Sunday everyone was surprised when she walked down the aisle of the little church. The minister was doubly happy: to see her return to the fold, and to receive from her the use of her unoccupied house, so that he could now be married.

Nevertheless, it was the hard case of John Gleason, and not the young preacher's eloquence, that had made her change her fixed habit of thought. To quote Miss Wilkins' own forceful ending:

"I ain't going to say much about it, but I'm going to say this much--it ain't no more'n right I should, though I don't believe in a lot of palaver about things like this--I've made up my mind that I'm going to believe in Jesus Christ. I ain't

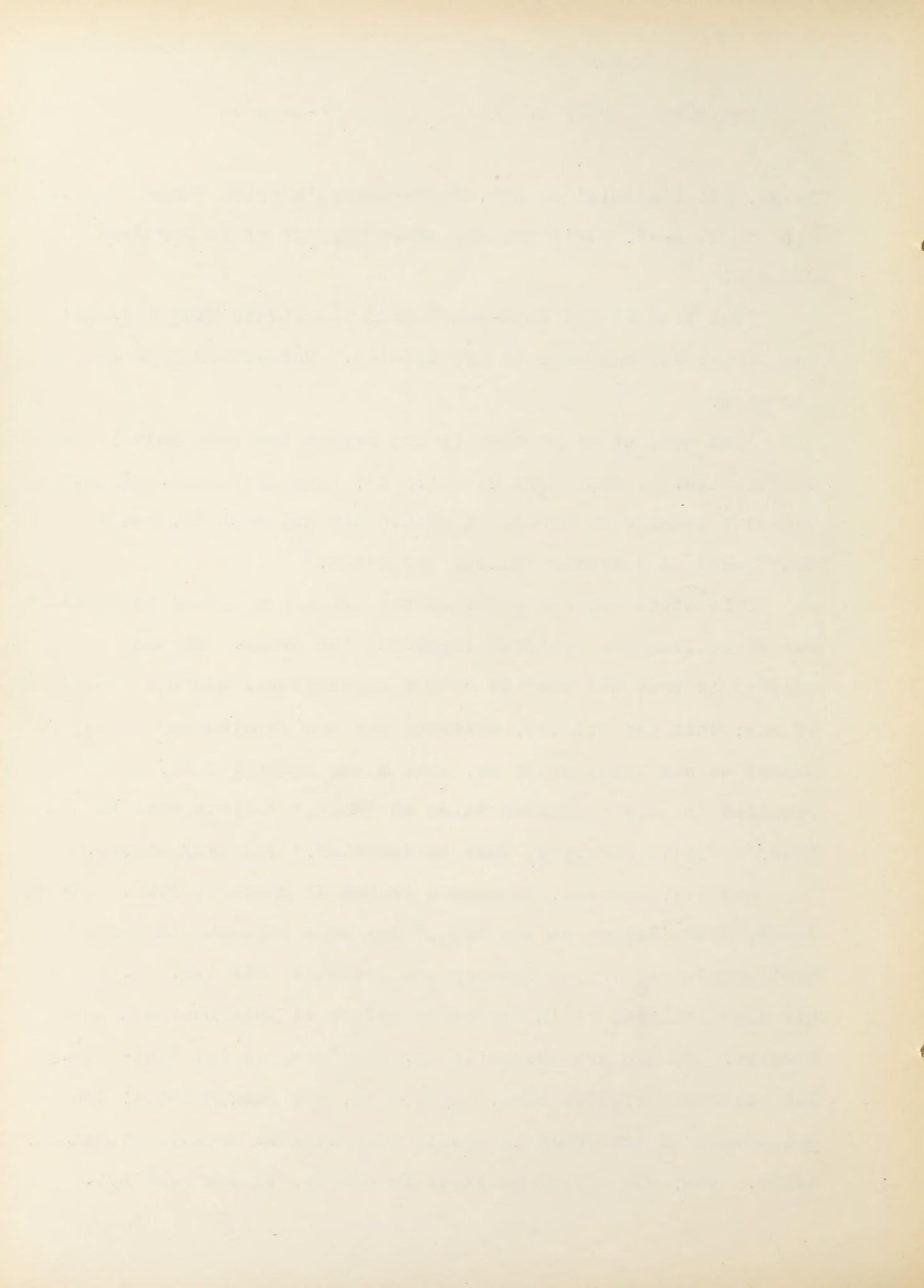
never, but I'm goin' to now, for"--Luella's voice turned shrill with passion--"I don't see any other way out of it for John Gleason!"

"The Wind in the Rose-bush" will illustrate Miss Wilkins' use of the supernatural in her stories. The author says of her work:

"The most of my writing is not really the kind that I myself like. I want more symbolism, more mysticism. I left that out because it struck me people did not want it, and I was forced to consider selling qualities."

This statement has afforded the critics a chance to accuse her of selling her artistic standards for money. My own opinion is that her stories of the supernatural are the poorest of any; that her ability, whatever her own opinion may be and honest as she undoubtedly is, lies along another path, which resulted in such matchless tales as "Gold," "Little Maid in the Door," "Lydia Hersey of East Bridgewater," and many others.

She did, however, produce a volume of ghost stories. One of these, "The Shadows on the Wall," has been included in Julian Hawthorne's Library of Mystery and Detective Stories. W. Patten has also included it in his first volume of International Short Stories. My own preference is for the "Wind in the Rose-bush." But all these stories have, in my mind, the common fault; the phenomenon of the spook is wholly inexplicable by any natural means. Now, one either believes in ghosts, or one does not.



If one belongs in the first class, one can accept these stories without reservation; to the second group there is no explanation of what is happening, so that this body of the author's work is unsatisfactory.

To return to the story to be discussed. Miss Rebecca Flint has come East from Michigan to take her niece, Agnes Dent, an orphan with a stepmother, to her own home to provide for her future. Though she has written her brother-in-law's second wife of her intentions, upon her arrival the niece is not at home. She is startled, as she stands upon the piazza of Mrs. Dent's house, to observe that, though there is no wind, the rose-bush is being violently agitated; further, that a single rose is in perfect bloom upon it, though it is late in the summer.

She entered the house. Agnes' absence was excused by Mrs. Dent on the ground that she was at her chums's, Addie Slocum's. Twice, during the evening, Miss Flint was sure that she saw her approaching; she was able to describe her niece, whom she had never seen, perfectly.

Addie did not return that night, nor the next day. Mrs. Dent went out, presumably to the Slocum's to find Agnes. Upon her return, she announced that her step-daughter had gone to Lincoln on the train.

Miss Flint then determined to investigate for herself. She found no one at the Slocum's; the only person she met was stone deaf and could give her no information.

In the meantime, strange things were happening in the house. "The Maiden's Prayer" was played upon the piano, without the touch of human fingers. A nightgown Miss Flint had completed for her niece, and placed in a bureau drawer, appeared miraculously upon the bed, its sleeves crossed like a shroud's, the one rose upon its bosom. But, when Mrs. Dent was called to inspect it, she saw no rose, which straightway appeared growing on its bush again.

After a week of disappointment, Miss Flint was summoned home, as her housekeeper, so a postscript to a letter read, had fallen and broken her hip.

However, when Miss Flint arrived at her house, everyone was as usual. By this time, her suspicions were fully roused; she wrote to the postmaster back East, who told her that all the Slocums were dead; that her niece Agnes had died about a year ago, under circumstances so peculiar as to suggest an investigation. Nothing, however, had come of this.

An interesting, an ingenious story. Some events may be explained as Mrs. Dent's machinations, but not all. By the way, Miss Wilkins' picture of the step-mother is worth noting:

"As she spoke, the beautiful deep-rose colour suffused her face, her blue eyes met her visitor's with the opaqueness of turquoise--with a revelation of blue, but a concealment of all behind." Coming as it does at the beginning of the story, this description puts the reader in the proper mood for what is to

follow.

Much has been said by way of comparison of Miss Wilkins' work with that of Hawthorne. With both writers there is a similar theme, the predominance of will. Though Miss Wilkins in general lacks the earlier writer's grace and ease of expression, it is no detraction to Hawthorne to place some of her work beside his. "Silence" is the tale that comes first to mind. It is a story of the colonists' struggle to survive against the attacks of the Indians; founded, no doubt, upon the Deerfield massacre. Miss Wilkins has told it so movingly, so vividly, that one can well believe the statement credited to her, that the writing of it taxed her strength.

A second story that may be compared with Hawthorne's work is "The Little Maid at the Door," a sad, sweet figure as, her father, mother, brother, and sister thrown into Salem jail because of witchcraft charges, she begs Ann Bagley to stay with her. Her entreaties, however, are vain; so that when her older sister and brother return they find her nearly dead from starvation.

The third story, and generally agreed the best of these, as it is one of the best of all her work, is "Gold," written of the Revolutionary period. Notice the beginning, abrupt, concise, yet affording every necessary detail:

"The colonies had but recently declared war with the old country; and Abraham Duke, being an able-bodied man, although no longer young, was going to fight for the cause." His wife

Catherine was pleading that he tell her where he had hidden the 5000£ in gold that had just reached him from England as a legacy from his father. Her husband refused her request, and seized the opportunity of riding off at the moment when young Harry Evarts, the son of their neighbor the goldsmith, rushed up in great excitement to disclose the fact that he had just found his father murdered.

The villagers suspected Abraham Duke, since he had been seen going into Evarts' house the night before. But Duke was away at the war; he had always borne a good reputation; no motive appeared; so the matter was dropped.

For years after, Catherine Duke searched for the gold. Not a nook, nor cranny, nor brick, escaped her. Every foot of ground outside was spaded up. But in vain. One night, robbers entered her house, demanded the gold of her, and, when it was refused them, they killed her.

So, when Abraham Duke returned, it was to a desolate house. He lived like a recluse; no one did for him save Harry Evarts, now a man, and his young wife--though Harry had always harbored the suspicion that this man was the murderer of his father.

It so happened, then, that the young couple found the old man dead, in his hand a paper upon which the girl seized eagerly, and read excitedly: "The andirons, the fire-set, the handles on the highboy, the handles on the desk, the

trimmings on the best bed, the handles on the dresser, the key of the desk--Gold."

Thus were dramatically revealed both the hiding-place of the gold and the fact that Abraham Duke was the murderer of the elder Evarts. Never was repetition more forcefully used than in this story, when Miss Wilkins repeats the statement on the paper in the hand of the dead man for her final paragraph.

"The Buckley Lady" is cited by Courtney as an example of a short story that is a condensed history.

The setting here employed is quaint, the time ancient, as indicated by the angel heads that Ichabod Buckley cuts on the tombstones he sells. Ichabod and his wife Sarah have a son and three daughters. The girls are Submit, Rebecca, and Persis. The older two are very plain, but Persis possesses a beauty as wonderful as it is rare. Yet all the children are treated alike until one day, when a coach, containing a mother and son, and driven by a negro, appears. The young man notices Persis' beauty, and tells her father that, when she is grown, he will return to marry her.

Then the preparation of Persis for her future elevated state begins. She is no longer allowed to work. It is the story of Joseph and his brethren over again. Her sisters and brother have to wait on her and toil for her. She eats delicate food, prepared especially for her; wears chintz and soft wool even on week days; is taught to play the spinnet, and--

deadly sin--to dance; even her fine yellow hair her mother tries hard to curl.

This training lasts for several years. Persis' mother dies. One older sister is married. Persis, virtually a prisoner, finds it very tedious waiting for her bridegroom, and longs for freedom, for the companionship of her mates.

One day, a strange young man appears in town. He is Darius Hopkins, the nephew of her music and dancing teacher. Persis and Darius fall in love; but the young man believes there is no chance for him, as his aunt has told him the story of "The Buckley Lady."

As is usual, though, love finds a way. Persis confesses to Darius that she loves him; his aunt evolves the scheme by which the Buckley lady is taken away in a coach and four, for she impersonates the mother, Darius the son; there is even a negro coachman.

"The New England Prophet" preserves for us in story form the religious mania that made many otherwise well balanced persons lose their usual common sense; for it is really of the Millerites, who looked for the end of the world and fully expected that they, the elect, would be taken at once to heaven while everyone else would be burned in eternal fire. It may serve, also, as the type of short story that is really the portrayal of character.

Solomon Lennox is the prophet in this story. His wife

Sophy Anne follows him in his teachings; his deaf and dumb son Alonzo draws upon a slate mysterious pictures of angels and wings and flames of fire. His daughter Melissa believes too, though against her will, for she is in love with Isaac Penfield, not, according to her father, saved from the wrath to come, since he is an unbeliever. Another doubter is Simeon Lennox, Solomon's older brother. Simeon is shrewd; he secures the deed of Solomon's house by telling him that, unless he is willing to make over his property, he does not really believe what he preaches. It is an amusing part of the story that Sophy Ann refuses to make mince pies for Simeon; she will never make them again.

The fatal night arrives. The believers wend their way, in their strange white flying garments, to a high hill outside of the village. Melissa lags behind; she finally yields to Isaac Penfield's solicitations, goes to his home, and is married to him.

The little company wait in shivering silence the long night through. The last to leave are the Lennoxes. Then they suddenly realize that they have no roof over their heads. Simeon has a kinder heart than he pretends, for he deeds back the property to his brother in consideration for Sophy Ann's promise to make him seven mince pies a week, one extra for holidays, as long as she lives.

One story, "The Revolt of Mother," I have purposely not included in those reviewed. Perhaps because Theodore Roosevelt, when Governor of New York, advised a group of women to read it, it has enjoyed a remarkable vogue. It relates, very simply, the turning of a worm: Sarah Penn has lived all her married life in a two room house, though her husband is a prosperous farmer, and though he had promised her, before their marriage, forty years ago, a new house. Now Adoniram Penn is building a new barn on the very spot where the house of her dreams was to stand. It is all too much to be borne. Sarah Penn tries to reason with her husband, but in vain. Finally she concocts a plot; a letter from her brother Hiram, in Vermont, tells Mr. Penn that he has found just the horse for his brother-in-law. Adoniram departs; while he is gone, the family move into the new barn.

This story does not seem wholly convincing, since most barns would be too large to be turned into a house. But Mrs. Freeman herself condemns the story for another reason.

"Were I not truthful, having been born so near Plymouth Rock, I would deny I ever wrote that story. I would foist it upon somebody else.

"In the first place, all fiction ought to be true, and "The Revolt of Mother" is not in the least true. When I wrote that little tale I threw my New England traditions to the wind and trampled on my New England conscience. I have had and still have retribution. There never was in New England a woman

like Mother. If there had been she most certainly would not have moved into the palatial barn. She simply would have lacked the nerve. She would also have lacked the imagination....As a rule, women in New England villages do hold the household reins and with good reason. They really can drive better....I sacrificed truth when I wrote the story. My literary career has been halted by the success of the big fib in that story. Too late I admit it. The harm is done."

In view of the fact that "The Revolt of Mother" is included in almost every collection of the best stories of Miss Wilkins, this is rather an amusing statement.

Miss Wilkins did not have to struggle a long period in order to have her work accepted and printed. Nor was recognition slow in coming. As early as 1890 the New York Critic wrote: "There is something like a craze in England over Mary E. Wilkins." Over her second collection the London Spectator went to superlatives of praise: "The stories are among the most remarkable feats of what we may call impressionism in our language, so powerfully do they stamp on the reader's mind the image of the classes and individuals they portray without spending on the picture a single redundant word, a single superfluous word."

She has many admirers among the French, also. Here is the comment of Madame Blanc, writing in "Revue des Deux Mondes." "Through the very modern talent of Miss Wilkins one may study,

not without interest, a soul as curious as the Scandinavian or the Russian, although one quite lacking the same enigmatic seduction; I mean the English soul of the 17th C, translated into a region which has become the ancient portion of America.... The vivifying influence is the same as that produced upon us by harsh sea winds or robust Alpine flowers."

In our own country, comments upon Miss Wilkins' work have been varied, from the most severe criticism to the warmest praise. Grant Overton, in his work "The Women Who Make Our Novels"¹ has nothing but censure. "Both as a short story writer and as a novelist her work is unimportant, ephemeral, and extremely overrated. There is no such thing as literary value in writing. There are only values in life. And what is Mrs. Freeman's value in life? Slight, reminiscential, pleasing, sometimes entertaining, occasionally revelatory of human nature, but never for a moment revealing anything unexpected, never anything of which we have not been perfectly aware--her stories are cordially welcome and likeable (in general) without having the slightest relation to the business of living. We read them and sustain a faint consciousness that once in some place among a few people they may have had some value bearing on life. We read them and observe that in the main they are told skilfully. We are very glad to have them--and that is all."

The same critic berates her most severely for publishing a collection of short stories, "The Copy-Cat," in 1914, on the

ground that the work was too trivial for such serious times. But, as Blanche Colton Williams remarks in her "Our Short Story Writers,"¹ the stories had been produced separately before the war was declared.

On the other side, we have William Dean Howells, who insists upon the literary value of her work; Phillips Brooks, who called "The Humble Romance" the best short story he had ever read; and Conan Doyle, who said in 1894 that her novel "Pembroke" was the greatest piece of American fiction since "The Scarlet Letter." Fred Lewis Pattee (The Development of the American Short Story)² writes: "A New England Nun and Other Stories" must be placed upon the all too slowly growing list of modern American classics." And a writer in Harper's Weekly states: "Since 'A Humble Romance' was written, other writers have come and gone, some have stayed, and will stay with honorable excellence, but to none do we owe so much during these years for that distinction and honor which upholds our literary ideals as to the name of Mary Wilkins Freeman."

Let us set down some reasons for the latter opinion. In the first place, she has shown ability, within, it is true, a fairly narrow range, to write upon a variety of topics, thus proving a healthy and outreaching literary breadth. For, as I have said above, if Miss Wilkins has written of plain and poor and weak young women, as in "The Humble Romance," we can offset

¹ page 171

² page 323

that volume with others quite unlike it, as "The Fair Lavinia," the heroines of which are beautiful and well-to-do. We have, as Mrs. Williams puts it, "one vessel of cunningly distilled colonial essence, marked, for lack of more appropriate symbol--Silence." We have stories for adults, of children, as "Young Lucretia." We have fourteen or fifteen novels, representing, had she written nothing else, the work of a life time. Of these, probably the choice of best would be between "Portion of Labour," Mrs. Williams' preference, and "Pembroke," so much admired by Conan Doyle. Then, for good measure, there are a play, "Giles Corey, Yeoman," and a detective story, "The Long Arm," in collaboration with J. E. Chamberlain.

Variety, then, we find a plenty. If an occasional lapse from perfect grammar occurs, we can view it calmly, charitably, all the more so, when we note the steady improvement in style through the years, the general clarity, sincerity, and even beauty of much of her work. Plot, insisted upon by many, is never lacking except in Understudies and Six Trees and People in Our Neighborhood, which do not pretend to be anything but pictures.

Characterization, an important element, is excellent.

Last of all, and, I believe, her greatest contribution, is that she remains the revealer of New England to itself and to the world. For her work has been printed in several languages.

Now let us judge Miss Wilkins' work as a short story writer, since it is in this field that the bulk of her work lies, from the tests laid down by authorities in this field. Arthur Machen is a sophisticated English critic. What is his formula? Ecstasy, that is, "rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown"; "if ecstasy be present, then I say this is fine literature." He considers that Miss Wilkins' stories have passed this test. "There is no incongruity in finding 'ecstasy' in these life episodes of reserved folk, for passion does come through the reserve, and occasionally in the most volcanic manner."

The American authority, Brander Matthews, after an exhaustive study of the French short story, finds eight requisites for quality in this medium: originality, unity, compression, brilliancy of style, action, form, substance, and fantasy. If Miss Wilkins fails to meet any one of these eight requirements, it is that of brilliancy of style, generally conceded not so excellent as that of Hawthorne. Yet, it is also agreed that her later style has shown a great improvement over that of her earlier work, and that it was at all times adequate for, and adapted to, her subject matter.

Briefest test of all is that familiar maxim: "A short story is no better than its characterization." And characterization, complete, consistent, is exemplified perfectly on Miss Wilkins' pages.

SUMMARY

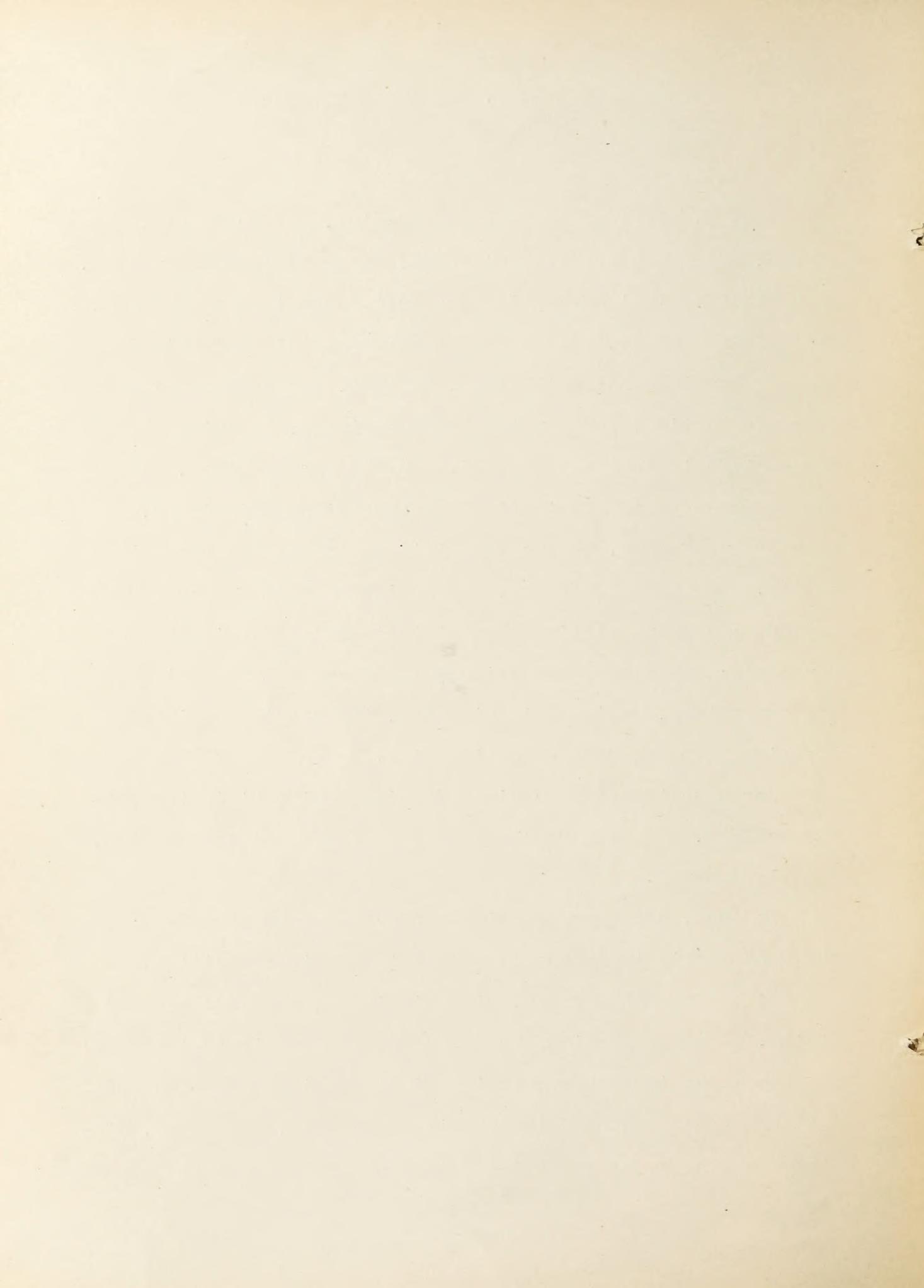
Mary E. Wilkins was born in Randolph, Massachusetts, January 7, 1862. On her father's side, her ancestry was Puritan.

Miss Wilkins' early life was restricted in several ways. In the first place, her knowledge of places did not extend beyond Randolph and Brattleboro, Vermont, where her family lived for a time, and Mount Holyoke Seminary, in which she was a student for the year 1874. In the second place, she was saddened by the death first of her mother and sister, then of her father, as she was limited also by her own ill health. For one of her sex, the horizon was made even less extended; a young girl's place at that period was in the household; women were her principal sources of information. Her own nature, serious, imaginative, induced the habit of brooding over the problem of the will.

Her education was acquired for the most part in the public schools, and was supplemented by her own private reading, eagerly pursued.

In 1896, after her reading public had been already won, she made a trip to Europe to attend the Paris Exposition.

Like many other women, Miss Wilkins had to earn her own living. Even as a child she had done some "early scribblings;" now she began in earnest, trying first stories and poems for children which appeared in juvenile magazines, and later, stories for adults, of which the "Story of Two Old Lovers" appeared



in Harper's Bazaar in 1884.

The influence of her life is clearly shown in her work. She writes chiefly of Randolph, with occasional glimpses of Brattleboro; she shows, especially in her novel "Portion of Labour," a knowledge of shoe-making, which was the chief industry of Randolph.

Charles Miner Thompson, writing in the Atlantic of May, 1899, formulates his theory as to the three epochs in the development of a town, any one of which may serve as story background. There is first the time of the founders; second, the decadent period, when the older generation has died and the men of the younger have gone away; and third, there is the modern, a kind of rebirth in energy. It is with the second that Miss Freeman deals.

Miss Wilkins was a prolific writer, for in the thirty years from 1884 to 1914 she produced upwards of twenty-seven volumes. Yet, though her early work shows faults of style, there is a steady improvement; for to her original inspiration and careful planning to the last detail before beginning to write she adds a thorough revision. While she does use the surprise ending, there is never a lack of preparation for it, so that the story is logical and convincing.

Her materials are largely found in New England; she stands as a revealer of New England to itself. She is chiefly known as a writer about women, poor in health and in purse. Nevertheless, she

does also treat of men, of boys and girls, of well-to do women. She is, moreover, thoroughly American and democratic; the wealthy class figures but little in her work. Her settings, unless the story be Colonial, are the parlors and kitchens of the middle eighties, as indicated by haircloth sofas, framed wax flowers, wood stoves, plush albums.

A study of Miss Wilkins' work reveals many admirable traits. In the first place, there is a singular compression, as shown in her brief titles, in her short sentences, in her sparing use of words. Repression is there, too, a reticence about laying bare the souls of her characters. She gives no more than is absolutely necessary for complete understanding, then stops. Good taste is the result. Her work possesses also a very great vividness, due to her habit of depicting clearly what she herself saw; and the sincerity of an earnest, truthful observer. Her use of analogy is so perfect that it must be instinctive. Excellence of characterization has won the praise of critics.

Many of her characters lead drab lives; yet Miss Wilkins is very fond of color and describes it freely in her stories. She deals chiefly with the serious side of life, yet a sense of humor as deep as it is kindly pervades her pages.

Like Hardy, Miss Wilkins has a great interest in Nature. Unlike him, she views it chiefly for its effect upon her characters.

In manner she is objective. She belongs to the realist school, and shows an accurate knowledge of psychology.

I have given synopses of representative work--of one novel, "Pembroke," which, like her short stories, shows the author's interest in the struggle of will, and her knowledge of shoe-making gained from her residence in Randolph; of five short stories: "Life Everlastin'" because it is one of the most powerful; of "Wind in the Rose-Bush," as an instance of her treatment of the supernatural; of "Gold," because it is in the Hawthorne manner; of "The Buckley Lady," because it is a condensed history; and of "The New England Prophet" because it is so largely a study of character.

Recognition was accorded Miss Wilkins first in England. She has many admirers amongst the French, too. However, her fellow-countrymen were not long in acknowledging her abilities. It is generally agreed that she has met the various requirements for excellence in descriptive narration, especially in the short story medium, and that she has attained a high place in this field.

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